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THE NEW ZEALAND FARM WORKERS ASSOCIATION

ITS RISE AND FALL 1974 - 1987

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ABSTRACT

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The New Zealand Farm Workers Association (FWA) grew from a groundswell reaction against the Kirk Government's proposed Agricultural Workers Bill, 1973. The Bill intended to end single sector industrial arrangements for over thirty thousand farm workers on stock, station and dairy farms by bringing them under the Industrial Relations Act 1973. Most farm workers believed this meant the introduction of a forty-hour week, penal over-time rates, compulsory membership and probable representation by the New Zealand Workers' Union (NZWU).

Many farm workers rejected this structure and the FWA resulted, a democratic, grass-roots organisation, run by farm workers for farm workers. It was committed to a framework of voluntary membership and an industrial policy of reconciliation and non-strike activity, concepts believed to suit the rural community of interests.

The Association attracted a membership of over eight thousand in its first year. Its initial success was achieved through the efforts of farm workers, the assistance of prominent people and farmer support. A National Party election promise to recognise the FWA led to the Agricultural Workers Act, 1977, which removed the threat from the rival NZWU and perpetuated single sector arrangements in agriculture.

FWA successes included the upgrading of Orders in Council relating to farm workers' wages after a delay of sixteen years, the first written agreement on conditions, and the development of policies designed to improve members' living conditions, to enhance their career prospects, and to make eventual land ownership more possible for them.

Claims of a rural community of interests were tested by the relationship between the FWA and the employer unions, who were guided by their parent body, Federated Farmers. There was initial cooperation on the updating of Orders, the formulation of the Agricultural Workers Act, 1977, and on research into

securing improvements in rural social life. But a fundamental conflict remained over land settlement and over securing better wages and conditions.

This divergence became apparent when the FWA found voluntary membership did not ensure its viability. In 1979 the employer unions refused to allow the FWA to introduce a draft membership clause into its Awards, offering alternative assistance instead. Federated Farmers' first concern was to safeguard the continuation of separate industrial arrangements in the rural sector.

Although a negotiated clause was accepted in 1982, it did not stop the decline of the FWA which was caused primarily by a lack of support from farm workers themselves. Without a strong following, the FWA was unable to operate as a serious political force. In the face of changing political and economic conditions, the FWA drive for increased status for farm workers was futile, especially after dramatic government policy changes in 1985. Its eventual merger with the NZWU and the passage of the Labour Relations Act, 1987, signalled the end of single sector arrangements and the complete capitulation of the FWA to the trade union system.

PREFACE

The rise of the New Zealand Farm Workers Association (FWA) in rural New Zealand involved a large number of people in an economically and politically important sector. In reconstructing events, I have drawn extensively on private papers, parliamentary records, newspapers, and the invaluable recollections of those directly associated with the FWA.

The existence of the Association tested consistent themes in New Zealand historiography. They encompassed the individualism of New Zealand farm workers, the perception of the trade union movement as alien to the rural scene, and a belief in the rural community of interests, in spite of farmers' superior political power.

The initial influence of the FWA was demonstrated by the passage of the Agricultural Workers Act, 1977. But the Association's brief period of prominence also emphasised the transitory, expedient nature of New Zealand politics and the need for a substantial following to effect lasting change.

The eventual capitulation of the FWA to the NZWU exploded the myth of the rural community of interests at a political level. It demonstrated the weakness of voluntary unionism, especially with a dispersed membership. The crowning irony was that the reaction against compulsory unionism which had led to the rise of the FWA also caused its fall.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AGM Annual General Meeting

ANZAAS Australian and New Zealand Association for the
Advancement of Science

ATC Agricultural Training Council

MAF Ministry of Agriculture And Fisheries

NZAIUE New Zealand Agricultural and Related Farmers Industrial
Union of Employers

NZDIUE New Zealand Dairy Farmers Industrial Union of Employers

FOL New Zealand Federation of Labour

FWA New Zealand Farm Workers Association

NZOYB New Zealand Official Year Book

NZPD New Zealand Periodical Debates

NZSIUE New Zealand Sheepowners Industrial Union of Employers

NZWU New Zealand Workers' Union

RBFC Rural Banking and Finance Corporation

YFC Young Farmers Club

Chapter One

THE ORIGINS OF THE FARM WORKERS ASSOCIATION

The New Zealand Farm Workers Association (FWA) grew directly from the threat of compulsory unionism embodied in the Agricultural Workers Amendment Bill. Introduced by the Kirk Labour Government in September 1973, the Bill's intention was to remove farm workers from the control of the Agricultural Workers Act, 1962, and to bring them under the Industrial Relations Act, 1973. Instead of the existing single sector arrangement under which farm workers' wages and conditions were determined from time to time by Order in Council, the new legislation proposed to draw farm workers under the same industrial umbrella as workers in any other industry.¹

Henceforth, farm workers would have to join a union and abide by its rules. The Bill envisaged farm workers joining with the New Zealand Workers' Union (NZWU), and was generally taken to mean the introduction of the forty-hour week, penal rates and overtime. The FWA, drawing support from farm workers and farmers, developed as a vehicle of vigorous and determined farm worker opposition to this possibility.

The Labour Government's legislation had its origin in the Labour Party Manifesto of 1972 and was designed to ensure that farm workers had a reasonable minimum standard of wages and conditions. In the rural sector, however, the general dislike of industrial unionism already prevalent amongst farmers and farm workers, erupted into open antagonism and hostility that

¹ Orders in Council fixing wages and conditions of employment were issued at the direction of the Minister of Labour.

unionism should intrude into the rural way of life.

Since the turn of the century, industrial matters in agriculture had been dealt with separately from the mainstream arbitration system because of difficulties in extending coverage to the agricultural sector.² There had been recognition of the conditions contributing to the need for special arrangements: the nature of the work involving seasonal and daily fluctuations; the close relationship between farmer and worker and isolation from fellow workers.³

The power of farmer organisations to influence political decisions against farm workers was another factor. This was illustrated by the refusal in 1908 of W.A. Sim, Judge of the Court of Arbitration, to grant an Award in the case between sheep farmers and the Canterbury Farm Labourers' Union. The grounds Sim gave for his refusal were difficulty of enforcement, cost to the industry, and lack of evidence of grievances.⁴

In 1936, when the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act was amended to provide for compulsory unionism, an attempt was made to protect the interests of the bulk of agricultural workers, especially an estimated thirty thousand on stock, station and dairy farms who previously had not been brought

² A typical comment was made by the Arbitration Court in refusing an application for an award by farm workers in 1925: "there are difficulties which are inseparable from the preparation of an award covering all classes of farm work". Stan Rodger, Industrial Relations - A Framework For Review, Wellington, 1985, p314.

³ New Zealand farms often employ only one or two people. The Agricultural and Related Farmers Industrial Union of Employers (NZAIUE) claimed that 35.8% of cropping farms employed less than 2 men and 50% employed less than 3 men. Submission to Labour Select Committee on the Agricultural Workers Amendment Bill, 1973, General Assembly Library, Wellington.

⁴ H. Gill, "Can Deference Survive", Proceedings of 49th ANZAAS Conference, 1979, pp1-40.

under an Award.⁵ The result was the Agricultural Workers Act, 1936.⁶ It continued single sector arrangements and stipulated that wages for agricultural workers would be determined periodically by Order in Council, at the discretion of the Minister of Labour. The system was satisfactory for categories of farm workers who were already members of unions, since their Orders were updated regularly.⁷

But the Agricultural Workers Act, 1936, had failed to give statutory protection to the bulk of New Zealand's farm employees, who remained unrepresented. The difficulty was that there was no compulsory wage bargaining and no specified time for review. Unless approached with an agreed proposal by employer and employee organisations, the Minister was unlikely to issue an Order. By 1973 those for stock, station and dairy workers were well out of date. The last Order in Council issued for workers on farms and stations was back in 1959 and that for dairy farms 1960. As a result the Orders had been largely ignored and wages set either by individual agreement or governed by the Minimum Wage Act which, in 1973, specified \$47.00 per week for an adult male.⁸ By comparison, the legal wage rate was \$21.08 for an adult farms and stations worker and \$24.80 for an adult dairy farm worker, in both cases not

⁵ In 1971, there were 34,282 farm workers on stock, station and dairy farms. This included 28,801 males and 5,481 females. New Zealand Census of Population and Dwellings, Industries And Occupations, Department of Statistics, Volume 4, 1971, p36.

⁶ The Agricultural Workers Act was amended in 1962 but had the same general scope.

⁷ Market garden workers were members of the New Zealand General Workers and Related Trades Union; shearers and workers on vineyards and tobacco plantations were members of the New Zealand Workers' Union (NZWU).

⁸ Minimum Wage Act, 1973.

"found".⁹

Government legislation had proved anything but adequate in promoting unity, common purpose and a collective voice for the average farm worker. In many cases, farmers paid above the minimum wage and treated their workers well, influenced by labour shortages and the "going rate". However, Social Welfare had been alerted to employees working for the old Order in Council rates and legally there was nothing amiss.¹⁰ A worker was often at a great disadvantage when it came to discussing wages on an individual basis and had little protection from exploitation or victimisation. Some worked in intolerable situations for excessively long hours. Others could be just out of school, a family relative of the employer, or found in a job which isolated them from regular contact with fellow-workers. Those with families living in tied housing were especially vulnerable. There was no legal protection from instant eviction for workers or their families in the event of dismissal.

Farmers themselves often saw nothing wrong in working from daylight to dusk, or even longer, and expected employees to do the same. Furthermore, it was "not done" to discuss items such as wage rates or conditions of work. The genteel condescension of many farmers was another powerful psychological factor in reinforcing the status quo. This could take the form of "perks" or extras over and above wages, installation of a flush toilet on a back country station because "they deserve it", free meat, or use of a farm vehicle. Such privileges were subject to the employer's goodwill and, however well meant, were evidence of a

⁹ 4a Farms and Stations Extension Order 1954, amendment No 4; 4b Agricultural Workers Wages 1960.

¹⁰ J. Kneebone, President of Federated Farmers, had been asked by Social Welfare to find alternative employment for boys misused in this way. Hedderwick to Author, 9 April 1990, p5.

deferential relationship where an employee knew his place.

Since 1936, the NZWU had nominal representation of stock, station and dairy workers.¹¹ The Agricultural Workers Acts of 1936 and 1962 had been very general about what constituted an "employee organisation", requiring only that it be an organisation of workers affected by the Order.¹² The NZWU's association with rural workers, originally centred on shearers,¹³ had resulted in periodic attempts to organise farm workers since 1936, but with little success.¹⁴

Results had not warranted the cost and effort expended. It was difficult to collect subscriptions from existing members, and other sections of the union objected to spending money on a section that could not pay its way.¹⁵ Farm workers were widely scattered and lacked the kind of collective identity that other trade unionists had, identifying with rural society rather than with the rest of the nation's working class.

In 1949, the New Zealand Federation of Labour (FOL) asked for the Agricultural Workers Act of 1936 to be amended to allow compulsory membership of farm workers in the NZWU, in

¹¹ Macalister Mazengarb and Co to Dr G.P. Barton, 21 October 1975, p3. Macalister, Mazengarb, Parkin and Rose, files on the New Zealand Farm Workers Association, Wellington, Macalister Mazengarb files on FWA.

¹² H. Rennie, New Zealand Farm Workers Association lawyer, to New Zealand Universities' Law Review, 18 July 1978, p3, Macalister Mazengarb files on FWA.

¹³ J.E. Martin, Tatau Tatau - One Big Union Altogether, Christchurch, 1987.

¹⁴ Groups were to form local committees to enable NZWU organisers to draw up claims to present to employers. Circular letter, A. Cook, General Secretary NZWU, to New Zealand Farm and Station Workers, 13 August 1936, NZWU Order in Council file.

¹⁵ Interview, D. Duggan, General Secretary of NZWU, with Author, 8 May 1990.

the belief that effective representation required such a change.¹⁶ In refusing, A. McLagan, the Labour Government's Minister of Labour, had replied:

You will appreciate that by the Agricultural Workers' Act, statutory protection was given to classes of workers who were otherwise unable, because of the nature of their work and of the fact they were in widely scattered and often inaccessible areas, to obtain the industrial assistance available to workers employed in areas where similar difficulties were not existent.¹⁷

With hindsight, the "statutory protection" can be seen as ineffective. However, the statement reiterated and justified the principle of the separate treatment of agricultural workers on the grounds of their special circumstances. It also indicated the influence of the farming lobby in limiting the role of unions.

In spite of this refusal, and the limited response of farm workers generally, the NZWU acted for them in 1953 to secure revised Orders in Council. It eventually did so again in 1966, but demanded preconditions of a forty-hour week and an Unqualified Preference clause which caused employer representatives to walk out.¹⁸ The NZWU failed to follow up

¹⁶ K. Baxter, Secretary, New Zealand Federation of Labour (FOL) to General Secretary, NZWU, advising he would try to get an amendment, 15 December 1948, NZWU Order in Council file.

¹⁷ A. McLagan, Minister of Labour to K. Baxter, Secretary of FOL, 29 March 1949, NZWU Order in Council file.

¹⁸ It was believed that the setting of preconditions was planned by FOL moderates to ensure that the employer unions would walk out. Their action was believed to have convinced the Labour Party that if it became Government, it would bring farm workers under the Industrial Relations Act and provide a moderating influence within the FOL. Hedderwick to Author, 9 April 1990, p3.

with an application to the Industrial Court for a judgement and there the matter lapsed.¹⁹ Since there was no provision for a general wage order in the Agricultural Workers Act of 1962, legislation on wages and conditions failed to get off the ground once again.

By 1974, the legitimacy of the claim to representation by the NZWU was uncertain, except on the grounds of custom. Membership in the relevant categories was almost non-existent and the NZWU did not deny the assertion by Hon. D. Thompson, National Member of Parliament for Stratford, that only 12 of 9,000 members could claim to be bona fide farm workers.²⁰ Many farm workers were resentful of the neglect of NZWU officials, and for this reason alone, were strongly anti-union in their attitudes.

The Labour Party Manifesto of 1972 had already indicated Norman Kirk's intention to introduce measures to help farm workers, an objective largely ignored by the rural community until the proposed amendment to the Agricultural Workers Bill was introduced into Parliament the following year by Hugh Watt, Minister of Labour. Kirk had expressed a special interest in doing something for farm workers.²¹ He had maintained his link with working people and the NZWU, at times using the Union's holiday home in Queen Charlotte Sound.²² The Government's nomination of the NZWU as the delegated farm worker organisation was both historically valid and

¹⁹ At this time the NZWU had been criticised for its failure to cater for its rural membership. Macalister Mazengarb & Co to Dr G.P. Barton, 21 October 1975, Macalister Mazengarb files on FWA.

²⁰ NZPD, 389, 14 February 1974, p68.

²¹ "As soon as it is practicable, we will be doing something to give greater protection to farm workers". Kirk to Rippey, 22 December 1972, NZWU Order in Council file.

²² Interview, Duggan with Author, 11 April 1990.

politically expedient. The NZWU had just recovered from a major internal scandal over misappropriation of funds and had narrowly escaped deregistration. The appointment of a new and more moderate General Secretary, and the additional membership from representation of farm workers, assured the Union's future. It was believed also that the FOL wanted to boost the moderate element within the NZWU.²³ The wording of the Industrial Relations Act, 1973, effectively ensured that registration under the NZWU was mandatory for farm workers.²⁴ If members could "conveniently belong to an existing union", registration of another society could be refused.²⁵ Dan Duggan, General Secretary of the NZWU, claimed that the Bill would not make membership mandatory and that, if passed, would only confirm the NZWU's right to negotiate an Award. Farm workers would then decide for themselves by voting whether to have an Unqualified Preference clause included in their Award.²⁶ But Unqualified Preference, which required employees to join the appropriate union within fourteen days, had been included in all conciliation agreements since 1961.

The 1973 Bill aimed to give agricultural workers the same protection as other workers, using the same legislation. The

²³ Duggan's reply was that farm workers would make little difference to the balance of power because "it would probably take ten years to sign them all up". The Farmworker, Volume 1, No 2, October 1975, p3.

²⁴ The wording was carried over from the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act, 1936.

²⁵ Department of Labour, Industrial Relations Division, "Some Common Questions Posed Following the Introduction of the Agricultural Workers Amendment Bill", 24 March 1976. Hedderwick files on the New Zealand Farm Workers Association (FWA).

²⁶ J.A. Eagles, "Farm Workers Will Not Be Forced Into Joining Union", New Zealand Herald, 21 May 1974, p3, NZWU Order in Council file.

proposed amendment appeared to help farm workers rather than harm their case. Rhetoric against compulsion, set hours and a minimum wage seemed illogical from agricultural workers who were at the bottom end of the wages scale. But this reaction was an expression of a complex matrix of beliefs by farm workers who demanded that their special social relationships and conditions of work should be acknowledged by continued separate arrangements.²⁷

Farm workers were already disillusioned by the lack of performance of the NZWU in the 1960s and had become conditioned to working out their own terms and conditions. One spokesman, K. Burridge from the Waikato, explained: "each farm worker is himself a mini-union able to negotiate his wages and conditions with his employer according to the circumstances of his work".²⁸

Farm workers resisted the pressure to join an "odds and sods" type of union under what they saw as a set of ready-made rules catering for other groups of workers. K.G. Holmes, later to be first national secretary of the FWA, explained an attitude that was prevalent among farm workers: "They do not want to be placed permanently in an agricultural working class subject to the rules of a union or to have their present good and flexible working relationship with employers impaired".²⁹

Farm workers widely believed that policies such as the forty-hour, five-day week were incompatible with fluctuations in weather, seasons and workload in the farming situation.

²⁷ Government wanted to avoid the proliferation of unions. "Editorial", The Farmworker, Volume 2, No 1, March 1976, p1.

²⁸ P.J. Freeth, "Anti-Union Moves Grow Among Farm Workers", New Zealand Herald, 20 April 1974, p3, NZWU Order in Council file.

²⁹ Ibid, p3.

Union involvement was often considered intolerable and the Government's action was interpreted as a railroading of the rural community with its "socialist regimentation".³⁰

Exasperation at farm worker attitudes was expressed by the FOL: "...they continue to parade the bogey of industrial unionism as they imagine it to be and appear to believe that workers on the land are a race apart from other members of our community...."³¹

Those in favour of the Bill included the FOL, the NZWU, and the New Zealand Labourers and Related Trades Industrial Association of Workers.³² All called for farm work to have an established code of working conditions like other industries; they claimed that the present situation made a nonsense of statements that workers could negotiate on an individual basis: "The fact is that they have no effective organisation to carry this out".³³ By adding stock, station and dairy workers to the NZWU membership, the statutory right of representation and bargaining power for farm workers would be assured.

Once the Bill was introduced, the NZWU mounted a publicity campaign designed to persuade rural workers to

³⁰ NZPD, 385, 13 September 1973, p3562, (Hon. David Thompson).

³¹ Submissions of the New Zealand Federation of Labour to the Labour Select Committee Concerning the Agricultural Workers Amendment Bill, 1973, clause 19, General Assembly Library, Wellington.

³² The two other submissions in favour were those of The Young Christian Workers' Movement and the Wanganui and Taranaki FWA. Submissions to Labour Select Committee, Agricultural Workers Amendment Bill, 1973, General Assembly Library, Wellington.

³³ FOL Submission to Labour Select Committee, Agricultural Workers Amendment Bill, 1973, clause 18, General Assembly Library, Wellington.

accept the legislative proposals. Modification of the previous hard-line attitude of the NZWU was carried out by Dan Duggan as General Secretary. He gave public assurances that the rigid forty-hour week would not be insisted on.³⁴ As evidence, Duggan referred to his own experiences as a former farm worker, to agreements among other sectors covered by the NZWU and to the legislation which made this possible. Sections 93 and 94 of the new Industrial Relations Act, 1973, enshrining the forty-hour week, also allowed flexibility:

(1) In every award the Commission shall fix at not more than 40 the maximum number of hours (exclusive of overtime) to be worked in any one week by any worker bound by the award, unless the Commission is of the opinion after hearing representatives of employers and of workers or affording them the opportunity to be heard, that it would be impracticable to carry on efficiently any industry to which the award relates if the working hours were so limited.

(2) Where in any award the maximum number of hours (exclusive of overtime) to be worked by any worker in any week is fixed in excess of 40, the Commission shall indicate in the award the grounds that, in the opinion of the Commission, made impracticable the fixing of 40 hours as the maximum number of hours to be worked in any one week.³⁵

Flexible hours had been written into Awards covering workers in orchards, vineyards and poultry farms. At the same time, Duggan was still not prepared to concede unlimited hours without penal rates, since it would render an agreement

³⁴ "Workers Union Fights For Farm Coverage", The Farmworker, Volume 1, No 2, October 1975, p3.

³⁵ Industrial Relations Act, 1973.

meaningless.³⁶

The NZWU claimed that if the Bill was passed, farm workers could seek election and in time become an effective influence in the union. Duggan claimed that farm workers would have the right to vote, "to change the rules, throw out the officers or reshape the union if that is what they want".³⁷ Agricultural workers remained sceptical about that line of reasoning because of a six-year qualification for those seeking office, and special provisions that protected a sitting executive from outside challenges:

No person shall be eligible for nomination for election to any office or position unless he complies with the qualifications required under these rules and provided further that the Executive Council or Management Committee is satisfied that the personal and industrial qualifications would allow him to represent the members with trustworthiness dignity and probity.³⁸

Local public meetings, organised by the NZWU and by concerned farm workers, began to be held in anticipation of making submissions. Attitudes were polarising as the significance of the Bill was widely debated. There were farm workers and sympathisers on one side and unionists on the other. Field officers of the NZWU were bombarded with questions by farm workers. Other rural groups became involved, including Federated Farmers and Young Farmers Clubs. Federated

³⁶ "Workers Union Fights For Farm Coverage", The Farmworker, Volume 1, No 2, October 1975, p3.

³⁷ J.A. Eagles, New Zealand Herald, 21 May 1974, p3.

³⁸ There was also a six year membership requirement for nomination to official positions. "Qualifications For Office", Complete Amendment of the Rules of the NZWU, Rule 32, NZWU Order in Council file.

Farmers was not keen to have the formal coding of working conditions or wages within a union structure. It had already objected to the lack of consultation before the Bill's first reading.³⁹

The emergence of organised opposition to the proposed legislation appeared after the Bill's first reading on 13 September 1973. By the time hearings for submissions on the Bill began on 14 October, local groups of farm workers had formed in anticipation of the formulation of submissions against the Bill. Organisation of farm worker groups began from Waikato in the North Island and from North Canterbury in the South Island.⁴⁰ The pattern throughout rural New Zealand became one of meetings called by a small local group, always involving farm workers, and often with wives, the occasional farmer and Young Farmers Club members.⁴¹ Along with farm worker representatives, they would invite speakers from the NZWU and occasionally the Department of Labour. After each meeting farm workers would usually withdraw and form a group against the Bill.⁴²

In the South Island, the possibility of a farm workers' union had already been considered, but under the aegis of the FOL. Activity by the FOL earlier in the year anticipated both changes in the law and local discontent at the Bill's intention of farm worker representation under the NZWU. This anti-NZWU sentiment was a contributing influence in the rise

³⁹ G.K. Stevenson, Chairman of the Dairy Farmers Industrial Union of Employers (NZDIUE). Unidentified newspaper clipping, 25 September 1973, NZWU Order in Council file.

⁴⁰ North Island beginnings were reported by P.J. Freeth, New Zealand Herald, 20 May 1974 p3. The South Island beginnings were described by letter, Hedderwick to Author, 14 April 1990, p1.

⁴¹ Wives were often important in organising meetings and in arranging transport.

⁴² Hedderwick to Author, 14 April 1990, p1.

of the FWA.

In Christchurch, during May 1973, an advertisement in the public notices of The Press advised of a box number to which anyone who was interested in the formation of a farm workers' union could write. Those who did so received copies of three letters: one was a statement of assurance from Bruce Barclay, local Member of Parliament and Under-secretary for Agriculture, that the Government was acting for farm workers through the Industrial Relations Bill; the second was a formal request to the Secretary of the Canterbury Trades Council that the idea of a farm workers' union be brought before the FOL conference; and the third was notice of a meeting of farm workers to discuss whether to join an existing union or to form a new one, in both cases affiliated to the FOL.⁴³ Trades Council and NZWU speakers were to attend.⁴⁴ It was widely believed that the letters were inspired by attempts of the Canterbury Meat Workers' Union to snatch farm worker representation from the NZWU.

Farm workers became involved when, in turn, the NZWU called a public meeting in Christchurch that was attended by about 100 people. Geoff Harkers, a farm worker who went out of interest only, noticed a discrepancy between the actual meeting and a subsequent press item which reported the formation of a committee to support the Bill.⁴⁵ Although publicised as a bona fide committee of farm workers, it

⁴³ Three letters, B. Barclay to R. Bruce, 2 May 1973; R. Bruce to G. Walker, 13 April 1973; R. Bruce to G. Harkers, 30 May 1973. Hedderwick files on FWA.

⁴⁴ The meeting was to be held at Trades Hall, Christchurch on Saturday 9 June 1973, 3 months before the Bill was tabled. Bruce to Harkers, 30 May 1973. Hedderwick files on FWA.

⁴⁵ Geoff Harkers, a former shop floor delegate at an engineering works, came into farming disillusioned with the labour movement. Hedderwick to Author, 13 April 1990, p1.

allegedly included a railway driver, a factory personnel officer and two housewives.

Local farm workers interpreted the press report as an act of presumption. A meeting in Cheviot, attended by about ninety farm workers, organised a further public meeting to determine the consequences should the Agricultural Workers Amendment Bill become law and bring farm workers under the Industrial Relations Act. Speakers from Federated Farmers, the Department of Labour and the NZWU were invited to put their points of view. The ensuing meeting had a large attendance, predominantly of farm workers but also of farmers and their sons.⁴⁶ The mood was anti-NZWU, with the result that the General Secretary, Duggan, was heckled off the stage.⁴⁷ Subsequently, six or seven meetings were held throughout the province, attended by farm workers, Young Farmers Club members and sympathisers. Each time a farm workers' committee was formed.

Immediately after the Agricultural Workers Amendment Bill was tabled in mid-October, representatives from the Canterbury area gathered at Rangiora. They resolved that delegates appointed by the Mid and North Canterbury Farm Workers' Committee make submissions from the Canterbury area to the Labour Select Committee, due to sit on 24 October 1973. Four farm workers, Doug Searle, Bruce Inch, Geoff Harkers and David Hedderwick, formulated a submission while sitting around Harkers' kitchen table. It requested that the Bill be dropped or delayed until all farm workers had the opportunity to

⁴⁶ In the South Island, there was rivalry between the Sheep And Cattlemens' Association and Federated Farmers. Some farmers who were not Federated Farmers' members supported the FWA, and helped to contribute to its rise. Hedderwick to Author, 13 March 1990, p1.

⁴⁷ It has been claimed that the hecklers were paid-up NZWU members who were shearers from the local pub. Hedderwick to Author, 14 April 1990, p2.

become better informed and the chance to express their feelings through a postal ballot. Searle, Inch and Hedderwick presented their submission in person, such was the intensity of feeling in the district.⁴⁸

In the North Island, reaction began in October in the Pirongia district west of Te Awamutu. K. Burridge, a farm worker and former agricultural student at Massey University, assessed the implications of being "regimented" into a union with little say in its affairs and policy. With the help of Karapiro sharemilker, K.G. Holmes, farm workers in the Waikato district were contacted. Subsequently, a group was formed which described itself as a Farm Workers' Association.⁴⁹ This Waikato Association presented a lengthy submission. It explained that farm workers perceived their job as one based on a close personal relationship with the employer where there was mutual trust and responsibility rather than a master-servant relationship. It also claimed that a factory type award would be detrimental and objected to legislation which would have "unionism imposed upon us".⁵⁰

Other areas and groups also responded. Three farm workers from Roxburgh asked that the Bill be dropped.⁵¹ A submission

⁴⁸ Delegates appointed by the Mid and North Canterbury Farm Workers' Committee, Submission to Labour Select Committee, Agricultural Workers Amendment Bill, 1973. General Assembly Library, Wellington. The group found its first experience at making a submission somewhat daunting. Hedderwick to Author, 14 April 1990, p3.

⁴⁹ P.J. Freeth, New Zealand Herald, 20 May 1974, p3.

⁵⁰ K. Burridge, Te Awamutu FWA, Submission to Labour Select Committee, Agricultural Workers Amendment Bill, 1973. General Assembly Library, Wellington. The submission also included a discussion on experiences in Denmark and Britain written by K.G. Holmes.

⁵¹ R.B. Shaw and others, Submission to Labour Select Committee, Agricultural Workers Amendment Bill, 1973, General Assembly Library, Wellington.

from Tapanui reported that an address to a public meeting by a Labour Department representative was followed by a secret ballot on the Bill. Thirty-seven out of forty-one employees and all thirty employers present voted against the Bill.⁵² Another group, the Waikato Farm Cadet Scheme Section of Federated Farmers, conducted a questionnaire among farmers and cadets. Concern was expressed that changes in farm employment would spoil a cadet's chances of eventual self-employment.⁵³ Other farm workers presenting submissions and motions included groups from Mahoenui, Waitahura and Wanganui and Taranaki.⁵⁴

Only one group of farm workers was in favour of joining the NZWU. This was a Wanganui and Taranaki group. It focused concern on the high turnover and loss of labour to the industry because of exploitation and abuse of people in the area, especially the young. The group cited cases of seventy hours a week being worked routinely and of youths who had been giving "of their best", being put off after the busy season.⁵⁵ Not all farm workers were opposed to the concept of unionism or of some sort of collective representation. Protection had to be afforded the underdog. This group's simple two page document revealed the predicament of exploited workers:

⁵² Tapanui Farm Workers, Submission to Labour Select Committee, Agricultural Workers Amendment Bill, 1973, General Assembly Library, Wellington.

⁵³ Waikato Farm Cadet Scheme Section of Federated Farmers, Submission to Labour Select Committee, Agricultural Workers Amendment Bill, 1973, General Assembly Library, Wellington.

⁵⁴ Full list available at General Assembly Library, Wellington.

⁵⁵ Wanganui and Taranaki Farm Workers Association, Submission to Labour Select Committee, Agricultural Workers Amendment Bill, 1973, General Assembly Library, Wellington.

The only redress they have is to the Labour Department but as there is no limit on hours to be worked and the award wages are so low the Department can do very little. Also most young people are, because of their age and inexperience too embarrassed to approach officialdom, so they leave and sometimes for good. Some employers we know of, have had up to ten employees a year.⁵⁶

Another aspect of union involvement was the place of farm managers under union control. Farm workers wanted status to be built into a farm working career through recognition of experience, skill and responsibility. The Rural Management Association was an organisation of farm managers.⁵⁷ They wanted to stay as part of an independent organisation which gave recognition to members' responsibilities, rather than be placed on an equal footing with other farm workers or shearers in an industrial union.

The intense suspicion and antagonism of farm workers to compulsory unionism was not restricted to the prospect of the ailing and recently discredited NZWU picking up extra revenue from new members. There were wider philosophical issues. Unionism threatened the traditional mystique associated with country life. Although workers wanted redress on wages and conditions, to some extent these could be balanced against lifestyle and job satisfaction.⁵⁸ It was widely believed

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Rural Management Association, Mahoenui, Submission to Labour Select Committee, Agricultural Workers Amendment Bill, 1973, General Assembly Library, Wellington.

⁵⁸ A. Loveridge, "'The Stayers Always Come Out On Top'. The Influence of Aspirations to Farm Ownership on the Attitude of Farm Employees to Trade Unions", December 1987, pp1-16. Paper presented to the Annual Conference of the Sociological Association of Aotearoa.

that union activity would destroy the special relationship in which worker and boss could see eye to eye. There was also a fear that unionism would damage prospects of upward social mobility through land ownership:

...a young urban boy leaving school with no previous farming experience can enjoy a fruitful career which in many cases is climaxed by farm ownership. But we feel this whole opportunity will be jeopardised if a union is thrust upon us.⁵⁹

Employment was regarded as an apprenticeship in which the right people could succeed. Many highly motivated farm workers identified with farmers since their own prospects of farm ownership were considered feasible. A strong union was seen to be against their future interests. Flexible work hours, freedom from demarcation issues, perquisites as part-payment, and tenuous economic margins were cited as reasons to keep agricultural arrangements separate.⁶⁰

There were many areas where employers and workers had identical views about proposed changes that were required. Both wanted reform of the existing situation, which was described by one employer representative as "an insult to agriculture".⁶¹ Typically, employers were prepared to agree on minimum standards, regular adjustment of wages, representation of workers, and the establishment of an Agricultural Wages Court with a special knowledge of

⁵⁹ Te Awamutu FWA, clause 4, pl, Submission to Labour Select Committee, Agricultural Workers Amendment Bill, 1973, General Assembly Library, Wellington.

⁶⁰ Ibid, pp1-2.

⁶¹ Stephenson, Chairman NZDIUE, unidentified newspaper clipping, 25 September 1973, Walker scrapbook of newspaper clippings.

agriculture. Employers urged that employees should remain under an amended Agricultural Workers Act. They rejected union involvement.⁶²

Farm workers and employers both asked for the principle of flexible hours to stay, to allow for variation on farms, between seasons and in work conditions. While workers said nothing against penal rates for overtime, the different employer bodies devoted considerable attention to explaining why the forty-hour, five-day week with penal overtime would increase costs, resulting in loss of production, reduction of labour units and possible changes to less labour-intensive farming.

Farmers presented elaborate arguments to justify why they could not pay more.⁶³ The trend towards larger dairy farms with an average herd size of 103 cows and reliance on employed labour was also noted. It was claimed that penal overtime would cause farmers to reduce herd size, change to one-man units and alter the type of farming operation. The New Zealand Dairy Farmers Industrial Union of Employers (NZDIUE) argued that hours could not be standardised easily because of the nature of work in the dairy industry. It suggested regular pay in the form of a yearly salary to counter the concept of a forty-hour week and penal rates. This way weekend work and busy periods would be offset by the slack times.

The NZDIUE claimed that dairy farm employment was regarded by "the vast majority" of workers as a stepping stone to ownership via sharemilking. Seventy-two per cent of workers were cited as being under twenty-six years of age. One-third of all milk at that time was produced by sharemilkers and approximately ninety per cent of farm loans at the Hamilton

⁶² For example, NZDIUE, Submission to Labour Select Committee, Agricultural Workers Amendment Bill, 1973, General Assembly Library, Wellington.

⁶³ Ibid, clauses 8,14,15.

State Advances Office in 1973 went to sharemilkers purchasing their first farm, testimony to the success of those with aspirations towards land ownership.⁶⁴

Farmers on sheep stations argued that the forty-hour week was impracticable.⁶⁵ They explained that jobs such as docking, drenching or mustering should not be done in the heat of the day. Other operations requiring contract labour had to be done as the gangs became available or as weather permitted. An attempt to charge overtime rates in shearing had been reversed in the 1960s.⁶⁶ If the forty-hour week was introduced, a farmer unlucky enough to have contractors such as haymakers turn up in the weekend would have to pay double. In the event of wet weather during the week, a contract labourer might suffer a loss of income because farmers would resist employment during overtime hours. Contractors themselves were accustomed to doing work when required and taking holidays when work slackened. And, of course, events such as lambing did not keep conventional work hours.

The FOL responded by arguing that such considerations could be catered for within the terms of the Industrial Relations Act, 1973. Union representatives accused farm workers of being dominated by employers. But farm worker antagonism to the threat of blanket union coverage was based on the perception of a shared community of interests with farmers, and a negative attitude to unions that had been hardened over time by the 1951 waterfront strike and continuing industrial unrest in freezing works. Workers and employers joined in common cause against the Bill, but in many

⁶⁴ Ibid, clause 9.

⁶⁵ New Zealand Sheepowners Industrial Union of Employers (NZSIEU), Submission to Labour Select Committee, Agricultural Workers Amendment Bill, 1973, General Assembly Library, Wellington.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

instances the response of farm workers was their own: "Farm workers from North Cape to the Bluff are showing that collectively they are just as independent as the farmers who employ them".⁶⁷

The return of the Bill to the House unchanged on 14 February 1974, gave the final impetus for the formation of a national organisation of farm workers. In the meantime, farm workers opposing the Bill had expected a response to their submission and had gone back to work.⁶⁸ When it became apparent that democratic duty had been done to no effect, the tidal wave of indignation grew. Campaigning against the Bill began in earnest. In rural areas, advertisements in local papers invited contact from parties interested in joining local farm worker associations. Usually an interested farm worker would ring around the local district and rally support. Following the pattern of a few months before, the farm workers would invite speakers from the NZWU and the Department of Labour to a public meeting. After the meeting farm workers would, almost invariably, form a local association.

The threads were coming together. It was a short step from wanting legislative protection, and from dislike of the NZWU, to setting up a national representative organisation. Many employers were willing to give time off or to go to a meeting in person because of their anti-union inclinations. Discussion on alternatives to joining the NZWU was inevitable. Farm workers were adamant that they did not want to belong to the NZWU and that they should have their own representation. The campaign grew as meetings were held around the country in a spontaneous demonstration of support for farm worker associations. New members were levied \$2.00 towards a

⁶⁷ P.J. Freeth, New Zealand Herald, 20 May 1974, p3.

⁶⁸ W. Withell, Secretary of the FWA, recalled that they were all very naive. Interview, Withell with Author, 12 August 1990.

"fighting fund".⁶⁹ Often meetings turned into spirited confrontations between rural workers and the NZWU.

The consensus amongst farm workers attending these meetings was that they needed permanent representation at national level. A decision was made by North Island workers to call a meeting in Wellington on the second Sunday in March. Holmes contacted all those who had made submissions to the Select Committee.⁷⁰ Interested parties were invited to attend. Farmworkers from the Waikato, Hawkes Bay, Manawatu and North Canterbury attended, along with other observers.⁷¹ When a delegation to Parliament was told once again that the Bill would go ahead, a small group led by David Mirams from Hawkes Bay went to the Wellington Club. Introductions were made to important contacts who were prepared to assist the cause.⁷² Withell, who had joined the delegation as a representative of the Manawatu-Horowhenua area, remembered this group coming back with suggestions for a lawyer, an accountant and a bank for the Association.

T.A. Scoular, subsequently the Association's accountant, wrote of his first meeting: "a small band of obviously outdoor types materialised around our office - weather-beaten and ruddy complexions, bushy beards (and) sloppy thick knit jerseys".⁷³ Lawyer Heughan Rennie recalled that he was in the office when a group of men arrived at reception. The group was upset and eventually explained that it wanted advice on

⁶⁹ P.J. Freeth, New Zealand Herald, 20 May 1974, p3.

⁷⁰ Hedderwick to Author, 14 April 1990, p4.

⁷¹ NZFWA First Annual Report 1975, p3, Hedderwick files on FWA.

⁷² The introductions were given through Dr Mirams, a relative of David Mirams. Interview, Rennie with Author, 9 April 1990.

⁷³ The Farmworker, Vol 1, No 1, July 1975, p3.

whether anything further could be done to stop the Bill going ahead. The ensuing discussion confirmed that a national farm workers' organisation was a realistic alternative. If it could become an incorporated society, then it would be possible to register the society under the Industrial Relations Act of 1973.⁷⁴

A committee was elected with T. Bridson as National Coordinator and Hedderwick as National President. Mirams and Hedderwick stayed back to draft a constitution and fulfill legal requirements with the assistance of Rennie. On 26 March 1974, the New Zealand Farmworkers Association was registered as an incorporated society.⁷⁵ By virtue of its membership, it could claim to be the representative body for farm workers in industrial and social matters.

⁷⁴ The only other alternative the group had was to register a protest by a policy of non-cooperation with the NZWU. Interview, Rennie with Author, 9 April 1990.

⁷⁵ NZWU Farm Workers' file 1, 1973-1974.